

The presentation of Christ

Malachi 3:1-5

Hebrews 2:14-end

Luke 2: 22 - 40

Last year around the same time, I preached on the presentation of Christ, a story that will always remind us about law abiding citizens. In it, Mary and Joseph abide by the law, Mary going for the cleansing forty days after the birth of Jesus. According to the law, they were supposed to bring a year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a dove for a sin offering but if one cannot afford that, a pair of doves or two young pigeons (Leviticus 12:6-7). And so, because they are poor, instead of bringing a lamb and a pigeon, they brought two pigeons. They did not let their status be an excuse to not follow the law. They were faithful.

They also consecrate their child, Jesus, to the Lord as the first-born child, an act that recalls what had happened when God had spared the lives of the first-born sons of Israel on that night when all the first-born sons of Egypt had died. If you are one of those people who do tick boxes, here Mary would be ticking 2 boxes in one go and rejoicing that she can now join worship as she becomes clean.

However, there is something unique that happens on this day, which this story offers. There is recognition, purpose fulfilment as we see the different stages of life come together.

My brothers and sisters, we are currently living with in a pandemic. I'm not talking about covid or any of these illnesses that in the medical world we have labelled as pandemic and the World Health Organisation runs campaigns for and puts messages for awareness everywhere. We have a pandemic that no longer cares whether it is in church, or society and it is worldwide. The church however, which is meant to set an example, to be a map, a guide is suffering the most. We have a spiritual, moral, and communal pandemic and we are bleeding out.

What has happened to the children, the young?

What has happened to the young adults, the young couples of the church?

What has happened to the older adults, those who are widowed?

We have allowed ourselves to look at the young as an afterthought. We major their mischiefs and rule them out or even write them off when actually, they need our guidance, they need our attention and need the platform to explore, to learn rather than being overlooked and prejudged. You hear statements like they will make noise, they will disrupt the peace, they do not have experience despite some having the qualifications.

We have allowed for young couples to live a life where they are overwhelmed and the place which is supposed to be a safe haven is the place where they feel judged the most. I know from within the African context, being a lady in her twenties and above and being single results in raised eyebrows and gossip with some trying to pair you off with someone because you are 'failing' to get married while others are trying to investigate your life to find out the problem because, there must be a problem.

To those who are married as young couples, they feel judged if they haven't had a child yet, those with children are anxious about their children's behaviour. Should a child cry, its considered noise and therefore a problem, should they want to explore, they are called disruptive. Young parents are

judged because they are failing to raise their child right or lack parenting skills within the church where they should feel loved, supported, and guided should they need guidance.

The older couples are looked at as if they have nothing worthy to contribute, they are old fashioned and surely cannot have anything new or good to contribute. Many a time, they are the people who have been part of the church life for longer sometimes than those who feel like they have a lot to offer. They are sometimes the people with the knowledge of the place, who know the history and even can shed light into what has been and what has not worked and impart wisdom or offer confirmation.

The widows and widowers are pitied, they have become the 'others' of the society while the bible in James 1: 27 says we ought to take care of them and visit them. I know it's been hard; we have had the pandemic and all but how many of us have taken time out, do take time out to check on those we know who are widows and widowers? Just they know they did not become invisible, they did not lose their status, they still matter, they are cared for within their church and community they live in and people they work with.

Malachi shares with us something, a pattern of how things have worked with God. It says, 'See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.' God has this system of sending messengers, people whose role is to prepare us, to get us ready, to give us information we need for the next stage of our lives.

Why am I saying that? because the church, our society, our world requires for there to be different generations, different people with whom if we embrace them, we give them their space they serve us as messengers, they help to prepare us for what is coming ahead.

To the child, the young adults can help to point things out in exploration and learning, to the young adult those whom we have called old can help us navigating things like getting married, having your first child, applying for schools because they have been there, they have made the mistakes that can inform us, so we do not fall into the same trap. To the older adults, the noisy child is there to give us hope for the future because life is a cycle. When our days come to an end you know it does not end with me, but it continues to generations to come.

At the presentation we see Jesus the baby who is taken to the temple, a place of worship. The fact that the baby might cry and any of the so-called disruptive things that a baby or children do did not stop Jesus from being taken to the temple by the young couple we have in Mary and Joseph. They as a young couple were more concerned in honouring God more than what society might want or say and we then see Simeon who had been given a revelation by the Holy spirit that redemption was coming and that he would see it. He was a messenger who would confirm that it is here and the Spirit that rests on him picked up that this is him even as a baby. Imagine how many young or even older couples that would have walked into the temple all his life and yet it is on this very day that he picks Joseph and Mary and baby Jesus and says this is it, the moment I have been waiting for my whole life.

Simeon becomes the messenger that prepares Mary for what lies ahead in saying, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too' vs 34 – 35.

It was not about being pretty, giving what Mary would have wanted to hear, no, it was about being real about what lies ahead. It was like saying brace yourself, there is going to be a stage that you will hurt and probably look to God asking those difficult questions but, in the end, it will be for the good of all people.

On the other hand, we have a prophet in Anna, who had been faithful never leaving the temple, always praying who after seeing Jesus begins to speak to all who will hear about Jesus and the redemption that has come. In this visit, her purpose is fulfilled and found as God answers the many years' worth of prayers.

How well do we receive those people or those words that maybe we do not want to hear. Some, relationships have ended, people have been sued for such in the church. As a church, we have suffered and will continue to suffer this spiritual, moral and communal pandemic because we have not wanted to hear and or even neglected the prophetic voices in our midst, what God is trying to warn us about the future, about what is coming. We have mistreated and outright marginalised the wise amongst us, the messenger.

Hebrews explains to us how Jesus had to come and be flesh like us, to free those who lived as slaves of fear and because he himself he was tested he can help those who are being tested. Jesus is able to help us in some cases by providing someone who has gone through what we are going through so we can relate and journey and find support but we as people, as churches, as communities have to first do away with the thinking and the way of living that we have normalised where we cannot be one and start to embrace one another.

I want to think that on this very day when the presentation happened, we were given an image of what it looks like when the church and the world comes together in the way God wants it to be, all peoples regardless of stage or status in life and we are bound in Gods love as all children of God.

When they meet, the Shepherds had gone back to the fields and the angels were back in heaven or on other mission, but God was still there in the baby Jesus drawing all these groups of people together.

Jesus, Emmanuel, is still with us; his love is still present. May we allow him to draw us all together, to embrace one another, to care for each other, to be compassionate and kind. And when we have that, may it not be limited to us here in our church but be something we take and carry within us to the workplaces we go to and the companies that we run so that we can build a better world and undo some of the hurtful and unhelpful conditions we have created.

As Mary and Joseph presented Jesus to God, may we present ourselves to God

As Simeon spoke the uncomfortable truth, we also ought to speak the truth with love to one another

As Anna presented Christ to the world, let us go and present Christ to our world.